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DE RUEHUB #0085/01 0411647
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 101647Z FEB 10 ZFF4
FM USINT HAVANA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 5182
INFO RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC

UNCLAS HAVANA 000085

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

STATE FOR WHA/CCA AND WHA/PD
STATE FOR DRL CNEWLING

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [CU](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#)
SUBJECT: GOC REJECTS OFFICIAL EXCHANGES; SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM
POSTPONED

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: During a January 15, 2010 meeting with USINT representatives, Cuban Ministry of Foreign Affairs Representatives emphatically declined to support USG-funded exchange programs. USINT subsequently learned that students and professors were being threatened by University of Havana officials if any students applied for an Institute of International Education (IIE) scholarship program supported by the State Department. As a result, the IIE scholarship program has been postponed and alternative distance learning options are being explored. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) On January 15, 2010 the USINT COM, PAO, and POL/ECON officer met with Josefina Vidal Ferreiro, Director, and Eduardo Martinez Borbonet, Counselor, of the North America Desk, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to discuss a wide ranging agenda, including educational and cultural exchanges. The PAO specifically raised a January 8, 2010 USINT Diplomatic note informing the GOC, and inviting facilitation, of an IIE scholarship program for 50 Cuban university level students to study for one semester at the University of the Americas, Puebla, Mexico, or at the Institute of Technology at Monterrey, Mexico City Campus. The IIE scholarship program receives State Department funding and was scheduled to begin in July 2010. Citing the tighter restrictions imposed in 2003 on Department of Treasury licensing requirements for visiting American academics, students, and cultural figures, and visa denials for Cuban academics and cultural figures which she described as arbitrary and offensive, Ms. Vidal categorically rejected the possibility of GoC support of USG-funded exchange programs until these restrictions are lifted.

¶3. (SBU) On January 29, the PAO, DPAO, and PAS Media Assistant met with university age Cubans interested in applying for the IIE scholarship program. Several reported that the University of Havana is administering warnings to all students that they will be instantly expelled should they even apply for the IIE scholarship program. Professors are also reportedly being warned that they will face expulsion if they support students, applications to the IIE program.

¶4. (SBU) Background: All Cubans must receive an exit permit from the Cuban government to travel off the island. Additionally, Cuban university students must obtain permission from their university rector as part of the exit permit application (and to be absent from their academic program). Consequently, GOC and university approval is essential for Cuban students to participate transparently in a scholarship program abroad. The GoC's refusal to support USG-funded exchange programs, in this case the IIE program, means scholarship winners will not be allowed to travel to participate in the scholarship program.

¶5. (SBU) Comment: We believe the GOC warnings to the

students and professors are dead serious. Last year, some of the Cuban students who were accepted to USG-funded scholarship programs in the U.S. suffered harassment and loss of academic standing, and in the end none received their exit permits to participate in the scholarship program. Although we fully informed the GOC about the IIE scholarship opportunity and invited official facilitation, this gesture of transparency and cooperation clearly did not change the equation. The GOC remains hypersensitive about tighter restrictions imposed in 2003 on Treasury Department licensing and State Department visa requirements, and what it sees as interference in its control over the education of Cuba,s youth. It is steadfast in its refusal to discuss or engage in progressive steps to achieve greater educational exchange flexibility in the near term. We believe we should continue to seek expanded dialogue and common ground with the GoC on education and cultural exchange issues, and that we should continue to support educational and professional exchange and learning opportunities for Cuban students and other Cuban contacts. At this moment in the relationship, however, it is clear that off-island scholarship opportunities are not feasible.

16. (SBU) Next Steps: Given the real and serious risks posed to students and professors related to the IIE scholarship program, IIE has put the scholarship program on hold. We recommend that IIE explore converting the scholarship program to a distance learning program that can be offered through USINT,s new Distance Learning Center. If the current climate shifts positively, and before the program funding expires, we recommend that IIE revisit the concept of an off-island scholarship opportunity. Although the program

concept is excellent, the current climate is not. In the meantime, post will prepare a response to February 8 GOC dipnote conveying complaints that our Distance Learning Center violates the Vienna Convention of 1961. FARRAR

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